

*If a child's videogame playing is getting out of hand, this article provides a number of solutions and also suggests that moderate videogame playing can have potential benefits.*

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## Videogames : Advice for parents and teachers

Answers for parents and teachers, concerned about videogames and young people, and some potential benefits of videogame playing.

*Parents and teachers need to remember that in the right context videogames can be educational (helping children to think and learn more quickly), can help raise a child's self-esteem, and can increase the speed of their reaction times.*

Over the last ten years, I have received many letters and 'phonecalls from parents and teachers wanting advice concerning videogames. Typical examples include 'Is my child playing too much?', 'Will playing videogames spoil my pupils' education?', 'Are videogames bad for children's health? and 'How do I know if a child is spending too long playing videogames?'.

To answer these and other questions in a simple and helpful way, I have written this article as a way of disseminating this information quickly and easily.

### A few rules

To begin with parents (and in some instances teachers) should begin by finding out what videogames their children are actually playing! Parents and teachers might find that some of them contain material that they would prefer them not to be having exposure to. If they have objections to the content of the games they should facilitate discussion with children about this, and if appropriate, have a few rules. A few aims with children should be :

- ▷ To help them choose suitable games which are still fun
- ▷ To talk with them about the content of the games so that they understand the difference between make-believe and reality
- ▷ To discourage solitary game playing
- ▷ To guard against obsessive playing

- ▷ To follow recommendations on the possible risks outlined by videogame manufacturers
- ▷ To ensure that they have plenty of other activities to pursue in their free time besides the playing of videogames

### Educational

Parents and teachers need to remember that in the right context videogames can be educational (helping children to think and learn more quickly), can help raise a child's self-esteem, and can increase the speed of their reaction times. Many of these benefits were outlined in a previous issue of 'Education and Health' (Griffiths, 2002). Parents and teachers can also use videogames as a starting point for other activities like painting, drawing, acting or storytelling. All of these things will help a child at school. It needs to be remembered that videogame playing is just one of many activities that a child can do alongside sporting activities, school clubs, reading and watching the television. These can all contribute to a balanced recreational diet.

### How much is too much?

When does it become a problem? The most asked question a parent wants answering is "How much videogame playing is too much?".

To help answer this question I devised the following checklist. It is designed to check if a child's videogame playing is getting out of

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hand:

Ask these simple questions.

Does the child...

- ▷ play videogames almost every day?
- ▷ often play videogames for long periods (over 3 to 4 hours at a time)?
- ▷ play videogames for excitement or 'buzz'?
- ▷ get restless, irritable, and moody if they can't play videogames?
- ▷ sacrifice social and sporting activities to play videogames?
- ▷ play videogames instead of doing their homework?
- ▷ try to cut down their videogame playing but can't?

If the answer is 'yes' to more than four of these questions, then the child may be playing too much.

### What can you do?

So what can you do if a child is playing videogames too much?

- ✓ First of all, check the content of the games. Try and give children games that are educational rather than the violent ones. Parents usually have control over what their child watches on television - videogames should not be any different.
- ✓ Secondly, try to encourage video game playing in groups rather than as a solitary activity. This will lead to children talking and working together.
- ✓ Thirdly, set time limits on children's playing time. Tell them that they can play for a couple of hours after they have done their homework or their chores - not before.
- ✓ Fourthly, parents should always get their children to follow the recommendations by the videogame manufacturers (e.g., sit at least two feet from the screen, play in a well-lit room, never have the screen at maximum brightness, and never play videogames when feeling tired).
- ✓ Finally, if all else fails, temporarily take away the games console and then give it back to them on a part-time basis when appropriate.

### Some final thoughts

I have spent many years examining both the possible dangers and the potential benefits of videogame playing. Evidence suggests that in the right context videogames can have positive health and educational benefits to a large range of different sub-groups.

What is also clear from the case studies displaying the more negative consequences of playing is that they all involved children who were excessive users of videogames. From prevalence studies in this area, there is little evidence of serious acute adverse effects on health

from moderate play. In fact, in one of my studies, I found that moderate videogame players were more likely to have friends, do homework, and engage in sporting activities, than those who played no videogames at all!

For excessive videogame players, adverse effects are likely to be relatively minor, and temporary, resolving spontaneously with decreased frequency of play, or to affect only a small subgroup of players. Excessive players are the most at-risk from developing health problems although more research is needed.

### Videogames potential

If care is taken in the design, and if they are put into the right context, videogames have the potential to be used as training aids in classrooms and therapeutic settings, and to provide skills in psychomotor coordination, and in simulations of real life events (e.g., training recruits for the armed forces). There is, however, a need for a general taxonomy of videogames as it could be the case that particular types of games have very positive effects while other types are not so positive.

#### Reference

Griffiths, MD. (2002). The educational benefits of videogames. *Education and Health*, 20(2): 47-51.  
Available at <http://www.sheu.org.uk/pubs/eh.htm>